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The Multiplicity Straightjacket

By Alena Drieschova, Cardiff University

My ideal contribution to this forum would be to take the concept of multiplicity and say how it is going to illuminate my research, how it will allow me to see things differently, and add a new and fascinating angle to my work. I could do that, and it would be a valuable intervention. But, I won't. When I hear that the notion of multiplicity as different and "co-existing societies," should be the rallying cry for the discipline, and IR scholars should focus on studying the co-existence, difference, interaction, combination, and dialectical change of different societies to make their field of study relevant for other social sciences, a set of warning lights goes off, and I found it most important for my intervention to focus on these warning lights. The red flags group around two issues. The first issue concerns the notion that a study of multiplicity should become the core of the IR discipline. The second issue concerns the question of how we define scholarly disciplines, and whether academic fields are really defined by a core subject matter.

First, the notion of multiplicity is very similar to the concept of anarchy that has often been invoked in the history's discipline as the core around which IR scholarship should evolve. As Rosenberg writes multiplicity is anarchy with a plus sign instead of a minus sign, and he suggests that that makes all the difference.¹ It does make some difference, but it does not make all the difference. Some criticisms still apply. Notably, the notion of multiplicity cannot get rid of half the criticisms post-structural scholars such as Ashley and Walker raised in the 1980s and 1990s against neo-realism.² The first half of Walker's and Ashley's criticism was that neo-realists made a clear separation between an inside and an outside. This criticism still applies in Rosenberg's notion of multiplicity. The second part of the criticism, namely that the inside is privileged with a notion of order, while the outside by binary opposition has to be resigned to the notion of anarchy, no longer holds, because Rosenberg replaced the minus sign of the outside with a plus sign.

Still, the first half of the critique holds, Rosenberg is a prisoner to the spatial conceptions inherent in Waltz, according to which distinct units with clearly demarcated boundaries co-exist next to each other on an equal level playing field on a flat surface.³ Mediation occurs through diplomacy and warfare. It's the typical Cartesian cartographic imagination of space, the Westphalian straight jacket.

Yet, this is not how societies have been arranged into international orders over long periods of history and in most geographic regions, and it is not how international politics, or any other realm of the international operates today. For example, in Europe in the Middle Ages a

¹ Rosenberg, Justin. 2019. International Relations and the Consequences of Multiplicity. *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen* Summer 2019.

² Ashley, Richard. 1984. The Poverty of Neorealism. *International Organization* 38(2): 225-286; Walker, R.B.J.1992. *Inside/outside: International Relations as Political Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³ Waltz, Kenneth. 1979. *Theory of International Politics*. McGraw-Hill.

hierarchical notion of empire with the pope and/or the emperor at the top existed and this hierarchy (not co-existence) organized Europe into a single order.⁴ At the same time, there was a notion of heteronomy, of overlapping spaces, and indeed rights.⁵ Clearly demarcated boundaries did not exist. A diplomat was “whoever has been sent from another”,⁶ and diplomats could serve multiple principles at the same time. A group of subjects could send a diplomat to their king, cities could send diplomats between each other, or to the king. Warfare adopted the same characteristics. In short, there were not multiple co-existing societies, but there was a notion of hierarchy that operated as an ideal, and a massive intermeshing in terms of how societies actually operated.

In the contemporary era, there is a community of diplomats who are significantly closer to each other than they are to the homeless people on the streets in their hometowns. Within societies are the same multiplicities that exist between them, if not more significant ones. There are for example the multiplicities of race, which are leading blacks in the United States to live in an entirely different society, and indeed world, from the one whites occupy. The same can be said for class divisions, or gender divisions. I am not sure that an IR discipline focused on studying the co-existence and interaction of multiple societies will help us to understand these kinds of dynamics better.

Societies today are not neatly separated entities. They are nested within each other, they overlap each other, and they have all kinds of different relations to each other, some of which are hierarchical, others are ones of co-existence, and still others might be organized along a diagonal. Field theory, for example in the rendition of Fligstein and McAdams has looked at the ways in which different fields intersect each other in different ways.⁷ In international relations Emanuel Adler’s *World Ordering* analyzes how there are many different international orders in the international realm, who stand in all kinds of relations to each other.⁸ Adler studies for example the cyber order, the order of the corporation, and the European Union. A lot of innovative work has been conducted in international relations over the past decade, which moves beyond the Westphalian straight jacket, and studies for example the society of diplomats and their relations to each other. All of this work would get catapulted outside of IR, perhaps into the discipline of sociology or anthropology, it shouldn’t be.

If the notion of multiplicity is constraining, rather than liberating for IR, how can we then address Rosenberg’s legitimate concerns about the potential decline of IR scholarship, and the lack of ideas/concepts/theories that get exported from IR to other disciplines. To address these questions, we need to focus on how we define a discipline. Rosenberg proposes, but does not

⁴ Bosbach, Franz. 1988. *Monarchia Universalis: Ein politischer Leitbegriff der Frühen Neuzeit*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

⁵ Ruggie, John Gerard. 1993. Territoriality and beyond: Problematizing modernity in international relations. *International Organization* 47(1): 139-174.

⁶ Durandus qtd. in Queller, Donald. 1967. *The Office of Ambassador in the Middle Ages*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p.6.

⁷ Fligstein, Neil and Doug McAdam. 2015. *A Theory of Fields*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁸ Adler, Emanuel. 2019. *World Ordering: A Social Theory of Cognitive Evolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

discuss, that a discipline is defined by its core essence. Geography has its core focus on space, anthropology on culture, politics on power, economics on money. A different way of defining a discipline is by looking at the community of scholars who compose it, the institutional structures that keep it in place (departments, journals, professional associations, etc.), a canon of work that comprises it, and perhaps shared practices of scholarship and evaluation. At a minimum this is a proposition worth exploring. Saskia Sassen is for example an extremely well known sociologist, who has a significant spatial dimension in her work, and could have equally well been a geographer.⁹ The same goes for Manuel Castells.¹⁰ Pierre Bourdieu could have been as much an anthropologist as a sociologist.¹¹ And, indeed, Emanuel Wallerstein could have very well been an IR scholar.¹² His World Systems Theory bears some significant similarities with “Uneven and Combined Development,” the approach Rosenberg uses to highlight the distinct contribution a focus on multiplicity can make.¹³

So, if disciplines are not defined by a core essence, but as a community of scholars and the practices and infrastructure that hold them together, what has been the cause of the fragmentation of IR? And what has caused the absence of exportable ideas to other disciplines? The answers would then lie in our practices as scholars. A lack of dialogical engagement in the first case, and a lack of creative ideas in the second. I have not studied how creative ideas emerge and take hold, so I do not have any definitive answers, and can offer merely propositions that are up for debate. I wonder whether our practices of scholarship have lead to a situation where there is too much arm chair theorizing and not enough active engagement with the world out there. IR scholarship might distinctly lend itself to that, because its subject matter is so vast that it might appear impossible to grasp it empirically. Yet, getting our hands dirty, observing, and working more inductively might be what we need to come up with new innovative ways of understanding what is happening in the international realm. And once we develop more experience near concepts that have practical purchase and provide real insights into what is happening in our world today, maybe they will get picked up by other disciplines.

⁹ Sassen, Saskia. 2001. *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

¹⁰ Castells, Manuel. 1996. *The Rise of the Network Society, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture Vol. I*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell.

¹¹ Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

¹² Wallerstein, Immanuel. 1974. *The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*. New York: Academic Press.

¹³ Rosenberg, Justin. 2016. International relations in the prison of Political Science. *International Relations* 30(2): 127-153.